

British Theatre Guide

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Absolute Hell

Rodney Ackland

Part of The Judi Dench Collection

(2007)

"Nothing but drink and sex - drink and sex - one long, never-ending effort to escape from reality". That just about sums up the characters who inhabit *La Vie en Rose*, a nightclub viewed one month after the end of the Second World War, which only closes when everyone falls over. Judging by its bohemian clientele, one imagines that the club, run by Dame Judi Dench's hard-nosed but beneath the surface sensitive Christine, must have been in Soho.

Rodney Ackland's almost lost play was re-discovered by Sam Walters at the Orange Tree in Richmond. This production by Anthony Page was first seen on the BBC in 1991 and then partly recast it transferred to the National Theatre four years later. In addition to Dame Judi, the big star is Bill Nighy playing Hugh, an impecunious, gay writer and mummy's boy who has never managed to live up to his early success but still believes that he has a future, ideally in the film world where megabucks are to be made.

While these two are the central characters in an autobiographical look at post-war life, there are many other colourful figures to enjoy in this two-hour drama. Francesca Annis is particularly good as upper-class Liz. This middle-aged beauty is torn between Ronald Pickup as respectable Austrian Siegfried and a much younger airman; Charles Gray impresses as a poisonous film producer, Maurice Hussey; and William Osborne is perfect as Cyril Clatworthy, his deliciously camp assistant/slave.

From the younger generation, Nathaniel Parker plays a beautiful North American flyer with artistic leanings, Anthony Calf is an English officer who brings with him reports of concentration camp nightmares and there is a tiny cameo from Ray Winstone playing a policeman.

The relationships are almost all strained to the limits, with every kind of sexual pairing represented. The drink flows like water and this ensures that *La Vie*, as seen in this play, is rarely far from explosive.

The second half takes place on the night of the post-war election that brought Labour to power and then three weeks afterwards, as the club is closing and British life is on the point of changing forever. This is clearly the time to move onwards from the horrors of the concentration camps, and the heady decadence that wartime existence permitted those living in London.

Towards the end, Christine says, "I'm sick and tired of all this emotionalism" and to be honest, it does get rather wearing. *Absolute Hell* is a snapshot of one small layer of society during what has now become a historical era. It works best as a showcase for a number of fine actors to show off their skills, in almost every case as examples of damaged, dissolute but well-to-do drunks.

Philip Fisher

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)